Harry Jaffa: Citizen Straussian

(Remarks prepared for a Round Table on Harry Jaffa: APSA 2015)

I. Introduction

The title of my remarks is “Harry Jaffa: Citizen Straussian.”

Let me begin by paraphrasing one of Harry’s favorite authors: I have come to praise Jaffa not to bury him—not that I could bury him even if I wanted to, for his work on Lincoln, if nothing else, will insure that he, in his thought, remains alive for a very long time.

Having myself been infected with the Lincoln virus by Harry so that I am now trying my own hand at a Lincoln book, it is tempting to engage him on Lincoln. I am going to resist that temptation, however, other than to observe that Harry made possible the serious study of Lincoln as a political thinker and as a statesman whose deeds were suffused with serious thought. Lincoln had, of course, been of interest before 1958, but Harry changed the way serious people approach him now.

I could also speak of Harry on Shakespeare, or Aristotle, or the Rehnquist Court—all topics on which he had exciting and interesting things to say. A good friend of mine, a Ph.D. in English literature, said he thought Harry’s essay on *King Lear* the best essay on Shakespeare he had ever read. I think his essay on Aristotle in the original edition of Strauss-Cropsey a truly remarkable and eye-opening statement.

But instead of any of these I am going to focus on the topics announced in my title. If we are to believe Augustine when he claims that a man is defined by what he loves, then I would say that, apart from his private loves of his family and students, my title picks out Harry’s two chief loves—America, of which he was a devoted citizen, and Leo Strauss, of whom he was a devoted and ever grateful student.
II. Argument

My main thesis is that Harry’s career as a thinker, teacher, and political man was an expression of his efforts to hold together these two loves—Strauss and America.

As anyone who knows Strauss’s work will concede, this is not in every respect an easy task. Strauss strove to rescue and recover political philosophy, a pursuit that pointed in both the directions implied by its name—toward politics and toward philosophy. The problem, in a Straussian vein, lay in Strauss’s main thesis regarding those two elements of political philosophy: there is an irredeemable tension between philosophy and the city. That means that political philosophy is in same important respects a house divided, impelled toward two things that are themselves in tension or even disjoined.

That tension or disjunction underlies many of the schisms in the now large group of scholars who have fallen under the influence of Strauss. Some lean more toward the philosophy pole, others more toward the politics pole. This is one way in which one might characterize the split between East and West Coast Straussian. To be a bit more concrete, the student of Strauss who most leaned toward philosophy (and away from politics) was Seth Benardete. The student of Strauss who, at a high level, most leaned toward politics was, in my opinion, none other than Harry Jaffa. Benardete and Jaffa are the two poles of the Straussian school, at least among the first generation of his students.

I believe Harry saw things in much this way, for he did seem to believe that the cardinal error of the East Coast Straussians was that they did not attend enough to politics, by which I think he meant in part that they were too unconcerned with actual political things. It is, for example, impossible to imagine Seth Benardete writing Crisis of the House Divided. But I think he meant more than this as well. The east coasters did not regard the political and its
requirements (intellectual, moral, spiritual) in the way Strauss taught that Socratic philosophy needed to do.

Strauss was a thinker of polarities—of philosophy and politics, of Athens and Jerusalem, of Homer and Socrates, of ancients and moderns. But as Harry rejoined, Strauss did not leave matters at merely identifying an unbridgeable gulf between his poles—he sought ways to reconcile or at least mediate the tensions he was so keen to identify. With regard to the tension between the two parts of the intellectual discipline to which he professed to belong, Strauss did indeed seek a mediation. That mediation was the idea of natural right. The idea of natural right brings the city and philosophy together—or closer to each other at least, without simply overcoming the tensions.

Why do I say the idea of natural right is Strauss’s way of mediating the two poles of philosophy and politics? The idea of “the right,” as in “the right way” to live and be, is one inherent and defining feature of pre-philosophic human life as Strauss pointed out in *Natural Right and History* when he traced the origin of the idea of natural right.

If right, or the right way, is primordial for politics, then nature or the natural is primordial for philosophy. Philosophy comes into existence when nature is posited or discovered in contradistinction to convention. That is, when it is discovered that there are some matters held to be true because of human agreement and other matters that are simply true, without regard to human opinion. Nature is “the real,” as opposed to mere opinion of the real. Once philosophy discovers nature, the various ways of the various peoples lose their ability to stand as *the* way, as *the* right. Philosophy at first appears to be dissolving of political life, for it casts a skeptical spell over the right as understood in political life. Philosophy thus looks to be not only in tension with the city but to be an enemy of the city. The philosophers, possessed of higher truths, look with
contempt on the ordinary citizen and his ordinary “virtues.” These ordinary citizens do not live in the light of the truth and do not even suspect their blindness. The city or its citizens, for their part, see the philosophers as heterodox troublemakers or as fools. In either case there is no love lost between them.

Natural right, or the philosophic discovery of the true right way, in principle reconciles philosophy and the city, for with that philosophy brings to the city the true way, the way rooted in nature, and knowable only through philosophy. Thus with the discovery of natural right the philosopher could claim, as Socrates did, that the philosopher is God’s gift to the city.

Of course, it was Strauss’s view that political philosophy, in the guise of the doctrine of natural right, could not completely heal the disjunction between philosophy and the city, for philosophy also taught that the naturally right could not be actualized in the normal course of things. Thus philosophy continued to point beyond the city, but it made real contract with the city by taking seriously what the citizens take seriously (politics, morality, honor, and so on), by caring for and about the things the citizen cared for and about, and finally by giving the city guidance and aid in the citizens’ quest to live in the right way. The greatest example of a philosopher who holds out his hand to the city in this way was Aristotle, the very classical philosopher for whom Harry Jaffa had the greatest affinity.

III. The Jaffan Turn

Philosophy understood as political philosophy understood as natural right was the effort by philosophy to reconcile with the city by demonstrating to the city it could be a good and useful part of the city. Of course, in life we do not confront “the city” as such; we confront specific cities—Athens or Germany or America. Strauss saw political philosophy as only imperfectly reconcilable with the city as abstract entity; he saw it as even less reconcilable with
America, for America as he understood it (as much of the German philosophic community from which he emerged saw it) was a modern city, indeed a quintessentially modern city. This is not to say that Strauss did not see vestiges of an older politics still alive if not entirely well in America, but on the whole he saw it as modern, as is clear in places like his essay on “Three Waves of Modernity.” But Strauss saw modernity as an error—both theoretically and practically. So while he famously and sincerely held the American-type of liberal democracy to be the best possibility for the modern world, he had thorough going doubts about the modern world as a whole. In the political situation into which he was thrown, Strauss was, with few apparent second thoughts, a partisan of America. But Strauss was not a whole-hearted partisan of America. Indeed, what he taught in his classes and in his books could actually be taken to undermine partisanship for America, for the more he found cause for dissatisfaction in modern political philosophy, the more his stance looked to be itself a house-divided—one-half of his teaching building up the house, the other undermining it.

To understand Harry as a citizen-Straussian one needs to make a move that many of his students do not make—to see his thought as undergoing development and modification. I place the dividing line in the 1970’s, just where is not so important as to notice that both Thomism and Aristotelianism and Crisis of the House Divided belong to his first period. Let us call that his Orthodox Straussian period. The later works belong to his citizen-Straussian period, and include the work that is foundational for West Coast Straussianism.

A comment Harry made on several occasions in my presence makes me think Harry understood his first period as I am describing it. Several times he reported Strauss’s reaction to reading Crisis. Strauss made some complimentary remarks and then he said: “Mr. Jaffa, you and I are the only two who understand this book correctly.” I always thought Harry was far
prouder of this last comment than of all the praise Strauss gave to the book. In my presence
Harry never explained to me what he took Strauss to have meant by this assessment but I believe
that he thought that Strauss took Crisis to be a book into which he (Strauss) had special insight
because he saw in it an effort to accomplish a reconciliation of philosophy and the city—in this
case America—along the lines of his own broader agenda. That meant appealing to the doctrine
of natural right to do the main bridging work, while at the same time holding to the Strauss
depreciation of modernity (and thus of America’s modernist roots). Strauss was saying to Harry
(and Harry was very proud that Strauss saw this) that Harry had written an esoteric book—one
that had the agenda of furthering the reconciliation of philosophy and [this] city by having
Lincoln overcome America’s modernity. Harry could be proud that Strauss in effect saw Crisis
as bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh.

Proud as he was of Strauss’s recognition, I believe he nonetheless came to see that the
undermining character of Strauss’s approach to reconciling philosophy and the city was
unsatisfactory—that Strauss’s depreciation of America’s modernity was a problem for his own
enterprise. And Harry saw, I think, that this same problem beset his own effort to follow Strauss
in Crisis.

That Strauss’s solution did not remain adequate for Harry is visible in at least two places
in his late work. First, in New Birth of Freedom in the epigraph to one of his most important
chapters he quotes Strauss saying that the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence was an
extremely useful article of faith for the Americans, but, he does not pronounce this doctrine to be
true. Harry highlights his difference from Strauss by inserting another epigraph, a passage by
Lincoln, that Jaffa endorses in his own name—that the Declaration pronounces an abstract truth,
valid for all time. In refusing to pronounce the Declaration true, Strauss in effect, counters his
own effort to strengthen America in the Cold War context. A second indication is Harry’s change of view regarding *Thomism and Aristotelian*. He is orthodoxly Straussian there in drawing out the *differences* between Aristotle and Thomas—to the disadvantage of Thomas. But in his later work, Harry moves to reject the contrast he drew and even goes so far as to indicate that he is following Aquinas in key aspects of his own work. And in an essay from this late period he even draws together Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Jefferson, thus blurring it not erasing two lines he (following Strauss) had earlier affirmed—between Aristotle and Aquinas (or classical political philosophy and Christianity) and between the two Thomases (or ancients and moderns).

One could rightly identity Harry’s revisions of orthodox Straussianism in terms of his own two loves. At the end of the day, however much Strauss may have endorsed America, it was an extraordinarily lukewarm love compared to the love Harry felt for his *patria*.

One can also characterize his revisions as an attempt to be truer to Strauss’s own agenda and aims than Strauss himself was. I believe this is an important way to describe Harry’s intellectual development, for it allowed him to see himself not as choosing between his two loves, but as fulfilling both equally well. If, as Strauss held, political philosophy is the bridge, reconciliation, or mediation of philosophy and politics he does not carry that thought far enough in his failure to envisage a genuine and full reconciliation. That failure can be seen in Strauss’s hesitation to embrace Aristotle and the Aristotelian reconciliation, holding out instead for Plato and Xenophon; and the much lesser reconciliation these two Socratics stood for.

Secondly, Strauss himself had identified America as in effect, “the last best hope for mankind” within the modern world, but in his explicit teaching had made whole-hearted
commitment to America difficult. In one place, Strauss even came very close to Heidegger’s notorious equating of the United States and the Soviet Union.

On both these scores Harry was led to propose revisions to orthodox Straussian thought, and thus to open up the largest and longest-lasting schism among those who look to Strauss for guidance. Harry aimed to be a student of Strauss in the best way—not to be a rigid follower of the master but one who thought for himself and was willing to break with the master, in this case with the goal of better achieving the master’s work.

There were two possible paths open to Harry. One was to be open about what he was doing—to argue explicitly for the need to break with or move beyond Strauss. That was not the approach he took. Rather, perhaps in the spirit of Aquinas, he presented his position as simply remaining true to Strauss and to America as he proceeded to modify his presentation of both and to harmonize them thoroughly to such a degree that he could pronounce America to be itself the actualized best regime according to natural right. I believe Harry understood this mode of presentation to be a tactical move, another esotericism, and not in itself the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I believe that Harry’s decision to proceed as he did led to a certain ironic distance between himself and his writings, a distance that at the end of the day made his second period writings less powerful than his first writings were.